

DYLAN THOMAS'S 25 POEMS: A COLD WAR

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ABSTRACT

The fate of the poets of thirties, like Cecil Day Lewis, Stephen Spender, and Louis MacNeice, who left the mortal sphere in search of an impossible ideal is figured in Dylan Thomas's *25 Poems*. In their agony and despair, they thought that they were under the spell of a pitiless and cold-hearted Auden. Auden, as he avoided "the thoughts of challenge of time", as he was very much preoccupied with the "challenge of bells", was "unsympathetic", faulted his friends. It is the vocabulary of assertion in *18 Poems* that distinguishes the Apocalyptic poet Thomas from the poets of thirties who reflect, in their reluctance to commit themselves to any kind of assertion, a loss of faith in an ultimate solution. Thomas's *25 Poems* stands "for the example ... of living like a fugue and moving" and heralds the beginning of a new phase. The emergence of Thomas and the cold-love of friends drive on Auden's spirit with restless fury, "the moment of " his "hopeless sigh". Auden calls "the castaways" to "forget the grief", "hack of the cough, the hanging albatross ... cast back the bone of youth" and march "to denser summer" to "choose your gambit, vary the tactics of your game" for the next war on Thomas and his defender. In the cold war of rhetorics between irony and paradox, between Auden and Thomas, the poets of pity, Day Lewis, Spender, and MacNeice, having known that their future is uncertain and that Auden's ironic technique "seemed far too difficult and dull", "unable to endure " themselves, "sought relief ... in the insouciance of the soldier" in order "to be rooted in life". Their "hatred" of Auden "promised ... an immediate dividend, all of us hated". The prevalent "moods give no permission to be idle" and "through loss and anger the hands of the unlucky ...love one another".

KEYWORDS: Alienness, Cold War, Intensity, Twitter, Bafflement, and Communion

INTRODUCTION

The fate of the poets of thirties, like Cecil Day Lewis, Stephen Spender, and Louis MacNeice, who left the mortal sphere in search of an impossible ideal is figured in the horrid presentation of the Apocalyptic poet G. S. Fraser's poem, "Summer and Winter":

Winter does not offer escape

Forward or backward from its final landscape

And on all sides its skies fall

As if the whole world were a theatre

Where the round year had taken its curtain call. (*Modern Verse* 402)

They were banished from history as they were alien to it. W. H. Auden remarks in "Spain 1936":

The stars are dead; the animals will not look:

We are left alone with our day, and the time is short and

History to the defeated

May say Alas but cannot help or pardon. (*Another Time* 106)

After returning to the human world they found that it was equally alien: "Gave unaccustomed sunshine, / Prelude to who knows / What dead end or downfall...(MacNeice 109).

Fraser's poem "Summer and Winter" leaves its implicit remarks of his perceptive study that the visionary must pay a heavy price for the intensity; he is necessarily estranged:

Winter offers us, for instance,

The nerves of a leaf on a puddle of ice

And the terrible nearness of distance.

As if, being aware, one stood

At the wrong, the small end of a corridor. (*MV*)

The victims are death-pale as they can no longer participate in life. And in their agony and despair they thought that they were under the spell of a pitiless and cold-hearted Auden. Day Lewis observes:

For they took the land and the credit,

Took virtue and double-crossed her;

They left us the scrag-end of the luck

And the brunt of their disaster. (*Collected Poems* 187)

Analyzing the root cause of the afflictions of his contemporaries, Auden points out:

And out of the turf the bones of war continue;

'Know then, cousin, the major cause of our collapse

Was a distortion in the human plastic by luxury produced,

Never higher than in our time were the vital advantages;

To matter entire, to the unbounded vigours of the instrument,

To all logical precision we were the rejoicing heirs. (*Look Stranger!* 45)

Day Lewis is no longer active in writing poems that sustained his physical existence. He views it closely:

Now Death he is the bailiff

And he sits in our best room

Appraising chintz and ornaments

And the child in the womb. (*DCP* 179)

Expelled from both time and art, pity and fancy, Spender lives in miserable isolation: “ ... Was so much expenditure justified ... on the death of one so young and silly ... lying under the olive trees, O world, O death?” (*The Still Centre* 59) Finding “that the heart lives ...by self-betrayal, by circumspection is killed” he hates “this cold and politic self-defence ... hardening arteries and nerves ... grown dull with time-serving” (*DCP* 185). The experience of MacNeice is even more withering than that of his being as the lonely artist in the past who was at least partly rewarded for his suffering. He confesses:

Your Castle to King's Fourth under your practiced hand!
 What is the practice worth, so few being left to stand?
 Better the raw levies jostling in the square
 Than two men in a crevice sniping at empty air.... (*Collected Poems* 111)

It is the vocabulary of assertion in *18 Poems* that distinguishes the Apocalyptic poet Thomas from the poets of thirties who reflect, in their reluctance to commit themselves to any kind of assertion, a loss of faith in an ultimate solution. Dylan Thomas notes:

All things are known: the stars' advice
 Calls some content to travel with the winds,
 Though what the stars ask as they round
 Time upon time the towers of the skies
 Is heard but little till the stars go out. (*Poems* 152)

Thomas's *25 Poems* stands “for the example ... of living like a fugue and moving” (*MCP* 108) and heralds the beginning of a new phase. MacNeice states:

Now there comes the catharsis, the cleansing downpour
 Breaking the blossoms of our overdated fancies
 Our old sentimentality and whimsicality
 Loves of the morning. (105)

Thomas's creative mind, “turning outward, creates more objective patterns of feeling, and there is a deepening of his religious attitude to experience” (Ackerman 63).

Auden's lonely meditation, his silence in *Look Stranger!* seems a meaningless pursuit; the word “stranger” underlines his alienness, and like the withered sedge. MacNeice finds:

Hands from above them as of gods but really
 These their parents, always seen from below, them-
 Selves are always anxious looking across the
 Fence to the future—(116)

Auden “grew gay with ducks and deck-chairs, ... omens were absent” as he avoided “the thoughts of challenge of time”, as he was very much preoccupied with the “challenge of bells”(MCP). Commenting on Auden’s comfortable life, Dylan Thomas says in the poem “Grief Thief of Time”:

Grief thief of time crawls off,
 The moon-drawn grave, with the seafaring years,
 The knave of pain steals off
 The sea-halved faith that blew time to his knees,
 The old forget the cries,
 Lean time on tide and times the wind stood rough.... (*Poems* 60)

Auden, besides being “unsympathetic”, faulted his contemporaries: “You were all the rage for a while” (DCP 178). He called “the castaways” to “forget the grief”, “hack of the cough, the hanging albatross ... cast back the bone of youth” (*Poems*) and march “to denser summer” (MCP) “choose your gambit, vary the tactics of your game” (MCP 111) for the next war on Thomas and his defender. Thomas describes the tension and the cold war between Auden and Thomas:

Black night still ministers the moon,
 And the sky lays down her laws,
 The sea speaks in a kingly voice,
 Light and dark are no enemies
 But one companion.
 ‘War on the spider and the wren!
 War on the destiny of man!
 Doom on the sun!
 Before death takes you, O take back this. (*Poems* 56)

To quote Fraser’s lines reflecting the deserted, depressed condition of Auden is more appropriate in this context:

And Winter has no analogy to war
 Except the view of it the dying may have,
 But is not unlike an unhappy love:
 I love, but I do not like winter at all. (MV)

The emergence of Thomas and the cold-love of friends drive on Auden’s spirit with restless fury, “the moment of” his “hopeless sigh” (LS 12). MacNeice describes:

If only you would come and dare the crystal

Rampart of rain and the bottomless moat of thunder,

If only now you would come I should be happy

Now if now only. (*MCP* 106)

The Apocalyptic poet, Henry Treece describes the artistic climate of the second half of thirties:

The lads of the town

Drank down to the dregs

Then took a sharp axe to lop the tree,

But the thieves had been there first gathering logs,

And the black-thorn cock sang steadily. (*Contemporary Verse* 242)

According to Shires, "the special charisma Thomas exercised over some ... English writers owed much to his staunch individuality" (42).

Auden is destined to die with the emergence of the Apocalyptic poet Thomas, according to Day Lewis:

... but no such blaze

Briefly can cheer man's ashen, harsh decline;

His fall is short of pride, he bleeds within

And paler creeps to the dead end of his days. (169)

Auden's own comment on *Look Stranger!* that it was written with no grief but that of ignorance reveals the nature of his concern: "Inspire them with such a longing as will make his thought / Alive like patterns a murmuration of starlings / Rising in joy over wolds unwittingly weave"(11).

The poems in *Look Stranger!* that Auden composed during this period are varied in tone and temper. Thomas comments:

Out of the sighs a little comes,

But not of grief, for I have knocked down that

Before the agony; the spirit grows,

Forgets, and cries;

A little comes, is tasted and found good;

All could not disappoint.... (*Poems* 112)

The satires and lampoons show a distancing that seems quite remarkable in the context of his personal situation. Thomas maintains:

After such fighting as the weakest know,

There's more than dying;

Lose the great pains or stuff the wound,
 He'll ache too long
 Through no regret of leaving woman waiting
 For her soldier stained with split words
 That spill such acrid blood. (*Poems*)

The serious, weightier poems carry the stress of unresolved doubts and of inward divisions. The uncertainties of Auden's vision and the accompanying tension are conveyed in *Look Stranger!* but they are preceded by a brief interval of unusual calm. MacNeice reports:

For few are able to keep moving,
 They drag and flag in the traffic;
 While you are alive beyond question
 Like the dazzle on the sea, my darling. (*MCP* 108)

Auden feels that only by plunging back into the eternal, preternatural darkness—"the winter's storms ... or the funeral of the sun" (*Poems* 61)--from which all life is engendered he can explore the final mystery. Day Lewis comments that in *Look Stranger!* "the dark plays tricks ... on some of accredited glory", "the pale wounds weep once more", and "the archbishop is preaching ... stark naked":

... standing alone
 Among his people, the dictator
 Glares round for a bodyguard.
 All the fears cold-shouldered at noonday
 Flock to these shades, and await
 In displeasure those who ignored them. (*DCP* 202)

The poets of pity, Day Lewis, Spender, and MacNeice, having known that their future is uncertain and that Auden's ironic technique "seemed far too difficult and dull" (LS 45), "unable to endure " themselves, "sought relief ... in the insouciance of the soldier" (46) in order "to be rooted in life" (LS). Their "hatred" of Auden "promised ... an immediate dividend, all of us hated" (LS). The prevalent "moods give no permission to be idle" and "through loss and anger the hands of the unlucky ... love one another" (LS). In contra-distinction to Auden's metaphysic centric, transcendental freedom, Thomas is concerned with the means of life-centric, concrete freedom or salvation, and it is a question that keeps recurring in various forms in his poetry. Day Lewis estimates:

From the gashed hills of desolation
 Our life-blood springs to liberty,
 And in the callous eyes we see

The landscape of their dissolution. (175)

In *18 Poems*, the human heart represents the existent self, the experiencing faculty; the aggrieved mind readily responds to the extraordinary gaiety, and then relapses into a state of anguished loneliness. In *25 Poems*, Thomas's idea of salvation, "a sacramental feast" (*MCP* 187) shared with the fellow-poets and offered in the short lyric "This Bread I Break" emphasizes the mind's need of acquiring identity through experience and suffering:

This bread I break was once the oat,

This wine upon a foreign tree

Plunged in its fruit;

Man in the day or wine at night

Laid the crops low, broke the grape's joy. (*Poems* 136)

Ackerman, while bringing out "an important Eucharist concept", says that "a part can represent the whole; a part that is consecrated can refer to a consecrated whole. The concept of divinity lies in the accepted physical reality of the bread and the wine, not in some notion of the Idea behind external objects: consequently, each particle of life contains the divine" (70). The implied distinction between heart and mind suggests that it is Thomas's heart that suffers the agony of the poets of thirties and it is his mind that studies the heart to become aware of itself. Thomas's mind, thus, realizes its own potentiality and becomes a creative spirit in *18 Poems* only when it assimilates the experience gained by the heart. The word "bread", in this context, does not mean salvation or release from sin; it means freedom from ignorance, or freedom from the prison of experience, and this freedom is achieved through participation and involvement.

Thomas confesses that he can scarcely express adequately what he only dimly perceives in *18 Poems*, but the essential statement of the passage is not difficult to find:

My throat knew thirst before the structure

Of skin and vein around the well

Where words and water make a mixture

Unfailing till the blood runs foul;

My heart knew love, my belly hunger.

I smelt the maggot in my stool. (*Poems*)

He dismisses what John Donne calls that the world is the winter garden "blasted with sighs, and surrounded with teares" (*Metaphysical Poets* 66), and Thomas prefers to call it "the Eastern weather" (*Poems* 41):

This flesh you break, this blood you let

Make desolation in the vein,

Were oat and grape

Born of the sensual root and sap;

My wine you drink, my bread you snap. (*Poems*)

The poem, "This Bread I Break" "shows a more positive use of Christian imagery, being based on the service of the Eucharist" (Ackerman 69). In the poem "To Mr Rowland Woodward" Donne, contemplating on the aesthetic freedom, "works retiredness" of "a Nunne", "a chaste fallownesse" that "may outburne ... the straw, which doth about our hearts sojourne" (*MP* 82). In an earlier poem "Before I Knocked," Thomas speaks of man's instinctive nature:

I knew the message of the winter,
The darted hail, the childish snow,
And the wind was my sister suitor;
Wind in me leaped, the hellborn dew;
My veins flowed with the Eastern weather;
Ungotten I knew night and day. (*Poems*)

But he also admits the possibility of individual human beings attaining to noble creative heights. The poem "This Bread, I Break", as Ackerman observes, "registers a sense of the sacramental nature of the universe: the common things of life serve to illustrate profound mysteries, which are themselves witness to, and celebrate, the Creator" (70).

Thomas could not accept Auden's Eliotian theory of aesthetic distance that a poet can achieve from his miserable form only through extinction of self. "What happens is a continual surrender of himself " Eliot states, "as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (*Sacred Wood* 52-53). Auden's impersonal poetry, as envisaged in *Poems* (1930), "the articulated skeleton" is "more than the self-confidence of the falling root / Needs death, death of the grain, our death, / Death of the old gang..." (66). Day Lewis's experiential truth is that Eliotian and Audenesque "landscape of their dissolution" is "the hush of fallen ash, submission ... of a dying face now muted for the grave" (*DCP* 174), their theory of poetry is "wistful ghost" that "clots the veins ...and makes a still birth of our pains" (183). Thomas rejects Auden's idea of poetry as it fails to recognize the positive significance of human experience and effort:

Once in this time wine the summer blood
Knocked in the flesh that decked the vine,
Once in this bread
The oat was merry in the wind;
Man broke the sun, pulled the wind down. (*Poems*)

He places reliance, on the other hand, on man's inward strength and affirms his faith in the potential divinity of each individual human being. In *18 Poems*, Thomas asserts:

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees
Is my destroyer.

And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose

My youth is bent by the same wintry fever. (*Poems* 127)

In the poem "This Bread, I Break", as Walford Davies evaluates, "Thomas ... seems intellectually challenged by the paradox that the life-giving emblems of the Eucharist are produced by ending their life in nature, as oat and grape" (40).

In *Poems* (1930), Auden recognizes the necessity of "surrender" and "sacrifice" of self, self-annihilation of bread and wine, flesh and blood, the need "to destroy the efflorescence of the flesh, / The intricate play of mind, to enforce / Conformity with the orthodox bone, / With organized fear..." for artistic freedom, "a neutralizing peace" (42), and regards the involuntary, instinctive gestures of the young individual poets as irrelevant and irresponsible: "an undeveloped mind" (41), "day-wishing flowers" (43), "the lolling bridegroom beautiful" (66), "this lunar beauty ... has no history" (67), and an "instinctive look ... a backward love" (68). Thomas's reiteration of bread and wine indicates not merely a search for a rational, coherent explanation of the unusual mood, but also a thirst for the happiness of immortality that he enjoyed only for a while in *18 Poems*. Vernon Watkins remarks "No drop though round through that white miracle / Will sink, to be your oracle" (*MV* 365). Ackerman, commenting on the "racial aspect of Thomas's personality" writes that "for him it was the intensity of the passion of the moment that counted and he believed, like most Welshman, with the strength of his emotion, rather than his intellect" (69).

Of the two poems written on immortality, *25 Poems* has the kind of wit that modern readers would relish. In the other, *18 Poems*, Thomas seeks to attain to a mental state that is partly akin to what Auden enjoins on his contemporaries in *Poems* (1930). Auden recalls in *Another Time*:

So the giant who storms the sky

In an angry wish to die

Wakes the hero in us all,

While the tiny with their power

To divide and hide and flee,

When our fortunes fall

Tempt to a belief in our

Immortality. (64)

25 Poems, as Auden rightly observes, has little to do with immortality:

Some possible dream, long coiled in the ammonite's slumber

Is uncurling, prepared to lay on our talk and kindness

Its military silence, its surgeon's idea of pain.... (*LS* 12)

It is similarly affirmed in *25 Poems* that the mortal condition must be accepted as an inescapable fact:

Why east wind chills and south wind cools

Shall not be known till westwind dries
 And west's no longer drowned
 In winds that bring the fruit and rind
 Of many a hundred falls;
 Why silk is soft and the stone wounds
 The child shall question all his days,
 Why night-time rain and the breast's blood
 Both quench his thirst he'll have a black reply. (*Poems*)

But the poem further implies that mutability does not constitute the whole truth about existence. The reality of death does not disprove the process of growth, nor does it nullify the beauty of natural objects ripening towards fulfillment and unfolding themselves in unaffected placidity:

And death shall have no dominion.
 No more may gulls cry at their ears
 Or waves break loud on the seashores;
 Where blew a flower may a flower no more
 Lift its head to the blows of the rain;
 Though they be mad and dead as nails,
 Heads of the characters hammer through daisies;
 Break in the sun till the sun breaks down,
 And death shall have no dominion. (31)

The gulls, the waves, and the flower do not spoil their freedom for a "mad and dead" faith. Thomas's contemporary, on the other hand, bruises his own character and experiences fever and vexation because of his restless striving for "a white answer echo from the rooftops" and "ghostly comets over the raised fists" of "the man of frost," "Jack of Frost," and thus misses the sensation of growth and ripening. Both imaginative flight and conscious intellection twist the reality of experience and one can discern truth only when one can look upon the mortal condition with "content" and observe the process of becoming in a mood of serene acceptance. Thomas voices:

I hear content, and 'Be Content'
 Ring like a handbell through the corridors,
 And 'Know no answer,' and I know
 No answer to the children's cry
 Of echo's answer and the man of frost

And ghostly comets over the raised fists. (*Poems*)

The two contrasted, and apparently antithetical, descriptions of the natural setting in Day Lewis's *Overtures to Death* affirms the continuity of process in 25 Poems:

Now we at last have crossed the line

Where earth's exuberant fields begin, That green illusion in the sky

Born of our desert years can die. (*DCP* 183)

And it is implied that Auden, with his deathly appearance, can no longer form any meaningful relationship with Thomas's organic process. Day Lewis maintains:

No longer let predestined need

Cramp our design, or hunger breed

Its windy dreams, or life distil

Rare personal good from common ill. (*DCP*)

In Thomas's 25 Poems, death—the chief intensity—represents a liberation from the ignorance attendant on the mortal condition. "The slug's a living calendar of days" (*Poems* 61).

The time of year is late autumn and early winter, and all forms of vegetation have withered. The barren landscape corresponds to Auden's desolation, but there is another aspect in the natural setting that counterbalances the wintry desolation. Thomas observes in the poem "A Grief Ago":

A grief ago,

She who was who I hold, the fats and the flower,

Or, water-lammed, from the scythe-sided thorn,

Hell wind and sea,

A stem cementing, wrestled the tower,

Rose maid and male,

Or, master venus, through the paddler's bowl

Sailed up the sun.... (*Poems* 14)

The rich autumnal harvest carries a sense of fulfilment and a promise of sustenance; and even if the immediate prospect be of chilly winter, the revolution of seasons assures the advent of spring. The poet Auden, on the other hand, lives in a world of perpetual gloom, and for him winter is an unending continuum. Thomas explains:

Who is my grief,

A chrysalis unwrinkling on the iron,

Wrenched by my fingerman, the leaden bud

Shot through the leaf,
 Was who was folded on the rod the aaron
 Road east to plague,
 The horn and ball of water on the fog
 Housed in the side. (*Poems*)

The lily and the rose, emblems of the beauty, friendship and the passion of Auden's poetry that he briefly experienced in the thirties, have lost their lustre and are fading as he himself progresses towards death. Thomas describes:

And she who lies,
 Like exodus a chapter from the garden,
 Brand of the lily's anger on her ring,
 Tugged through the days,
 Her ropes of heritage, the wars of pardon,
 On field and sand
 The twelve triangles of the cherub wind
 Engraving going. (*Poems*)

Although the twin images of lily and rose call forth the memory of Auden's transient bliss, they are now part of a corpse that retains only a semblance of animation. Day Lewis reaffirms what is lost and what is regained:

Then shall the mounting stages of oppression
 Like mazed and makeshift scaffolding torn down
 Reveal his unexampled, best creation—
 The shape of man's necessity full-grown.
 Built from their bone, I see a power-house stand
 To warm men's hearts again and light the land. (*DCP* 187)

Auden's countenance is not merely death-pale, it symbolizes death itself.

Thomas's poem "How soon the Servant Sun" constitutes Day Lewis's answer to the speaker's puzzled query, and we note three stages in his experience—his meeting with Thomas and the tranced intoxication that reaches its climactic moment, the nightmarish dream, and his awakening. Thomas sums up the answer of Day Lewis who is analogous to the knight in the ballad "La Belle Dame Sans Merci":

A leg as long as trees,
 This inward sir,
 Mister and master, darkness for his eyes,

The womb-eyed, cries,
 And all sweet hell, deaf as an hour's ear,
 Blasts back the trumpet voice. (*Poems* 65)

There is nothing in the knight's narration to suggest that Thomas's intentions comparable to the lady's are sinister.

There is an element of uncertainty in Spender's responses to Thomas's gestures. In the poems "Ears in the Turrets hear", "I Have Longed to Move Away", "Should Lanterns Shine", and "The Hand that Signed the Paper", Spender plays the role of the lady and Thomas the knight. Does she love him, or does she only feel compassion for this mortal creature whose access to her world is destined to be poisonous? "Hands of the stranger and holds of the ships, / Hold you poison or grapes?" (*Poems* 50). Spender's arrives at the bitter realization:

... we, who are living, seem
 Exiles from them more living; for we endure
 Perpetual winter, waiting
 Spring that will break our hardness into flowers
 To set against their just and summer skies. (24)

Spender "longed to move away ... from the repetition of salutes" to "freedom's friends" but there are ghosts in the air ... and ghostly echoes on paper ... and the thunder of calls and notes" (Thomas 68). In the poem "The Uncreating Chaos," Spender quivers with the apprehension of a coming disaster:

I stand close to you,
 I will confess to you.
 At night I'm flooded by a sense of future,
 The bursting tide of an unharnessed power
 Drowning the contours of the present. (33)

The poem offers no assurance and seems to affirm the need for guarding against deceptive fancies. Thomas comments in the poem "The Hand that Signed the Paper": "A hand rules pity as a hand rules heaven; / Hands have no tears to flow" (*Poems* 128). Day Lewis who deified Thomas "with radiant flesh and receptive spirit" and "found a route on earth's true reckoning based" comments:

They have not known the false humility,
 The shamming-dead of the senses beneath your hunter's hand;
 But life's green standards they've advanced
 To the limit of your salt unyielding zone. (*DCP* 186)

Spender's sad moan and sigh imply a recognition of the unbridgeable gulf that exists between them and of the delusory nature of Thomas's happiness.

What MacNeice aspires to is the unity of experience, and one of the effects of this interfusion of ratiocination and feeling is that the poetic experience ceases to be merely affective. According to the New critic Allan Tate, the language of sentiment like love and politics or war, “mass feeling” and “mass language” which is different from “the language of the people” would make the poet to commit the “fallacy of communication” (373). “Mass language is the medium of ‘communication’, and its users are less interested in bringing to formal order what is sometimes called the ‘affective state’ than in arousing that state” (372). MacNeice estimates:

And hooked from the mouth like ash
Frame their frolic
Above the silent music
And the awed audience.... (MCP 112)

MacNeice is no longer his former self; dazed by strange fancies—“on the knees of bountiful gods ... we lived in the ease of acceptance”—and he lost his moorings. According to MacNeice, Auden’s *Poems* (1930) marks a rejection of this earthly existence:

For fretful even in leisure
I fidget for different values,
Restless as a gull and haunted
By a hankering after Atlantis. (107)

In *Poems* (1930), Auden adopts the dialectical philosophy of Hegel to convey his isolation from the normal human scene and from all vital forms of life. And also the consummation of the blisses that the condition of mortality can confer only momentarily on man. MacNeice rephrases Auden’s thinking:

I do not know that Atlantis
Unseen and uncomprehended,
Dimly divined but keenly
Felt with a phantom hunger. (MCP)

Under the influence of Auden, “a phantom hunger” for Auden’s popularity and greatness, MacNeice breaking “that circle” of his archetypal structure, emphasizes the need for the integration of cerebration and feeling, the principle of metaphor in his *Poems* (1935), and sometimes he himself tends to use affective terminology, “stooping to drink, to suck” (MV 368). He confirms:

Intricacy of engines,
Delicacy of darkness;
They rise into the tent’s
Top like deep-sea-divers.... (MCP)

But in *Out of the Picture*, he “crushed” this hunger, for “the frost ... kills the germs of *laissez-faire*” (MCP 122) and the readers can note his disagreement with Auden:

Our fear their frame,
 Hallowed by handclaps,
 Honoured by eyes
 Upward in incense.... (MCP)

Moreover, Auden's metaphysical structure, the element of cerebration does not result in a shrinkage of feeling; it enlarges the area of sensibility that incorporates intellection and in the process alters the mode of feeling. The fellow poet-stranger MacNeice who addresses the poet Auden is, like the wedding-guest in Coleridge's “Ancient Mariner”, a kind of norm of humanity, and his reactions pinpoint the plight of the forlorn figure:

From chandeliers the snow begins to fall
 Piling around carafes and table legs
 And chokes the passage of the revolving door. (104)

The half-sound neologic thinking of MacNeice as a “dry man”, “dry lover”, “shade”, “the dead stir”, “the landed crow ... lying low with ruin in his ear”, “death hairy-heeled and the tapped ghost in wood” (Thomas 102), and his sound faith in the neolithic paganism--“Let the stones speak ... With tongues that talk all tongues” (123)--are recast in Thomas's poems “Now” and “Shall gods be said to thump the clouds” respectively.

MacNeice finds to his surprise that believing in Auden's artistic belief that reflects the sensibility of a mystic, the belief in “the self-abnegation of Buddha” is “that is disbelieving ... the denial of chiaroscuro ... not giving a damn for existence” (MCP 107), that is a disbelief in Thomas's experiential, archetypal truth. “Fourfold shadowed / In a crucifixion's / Endless moment” (MCP). He reveals the truth behind Auden's poetry, his “principle of indirection” and his rhetoric of “irony as “a principle of structure”:

Intricacy of,
 Delicacy of,
 Darkness and engines. (MCP)

Then, as a matter of fact, MacNeice espouses the cause of paradoxical structure of Thomas in lieu of Auden's ironic structure because Auden's metaphysical framework is death-centric Thomas's paradoxical structure is life-centric. He affirms:

But I would cherish existence
 Loving the beast and the bubble
 Loving the rain and the rainbow,
 Considering philosophy alien. (MCP)

Auden's ironic strategy reflects indirectly the mythical, monolithic, monotheistic, and transcendental reality,

whereas Thomas's paradoxical poetry refers directly to the actual, archetypal, and polytheistic reality. According to MacNeice,

For all the religions are alien
That allege that life is fiction,
And when we agree in denial
The crows in the morning. (*MCP*)

In *The Earth Compels* MacNeice, while colliding with Auden, colludes with Thomas. Thomas portrays the journey of the intricate image of MacNeice:

My images stalk the trees and the slant sap's tunnel,
No tread more perilous, the green steps and spire
Mount on man's footfall,
I with the wooden insect in the tree of nettles,
In the glass bed of grapes with snail and flower,
Hearing the weather fall. (*Poems* 72)

And it is in this fidelity to thought and feeling, in this dramatization of the creative dilemma, that MacNeice departs from the Audenesque tradition and comes closer to the paradoxical structure and the archetypal tradition of Thomas, "the natural parallel" (*Poems*). According to MacNeice, the ecstasy of *25 Poems* is brief, but it gives him a sudden glimpse into the the nature of pure, unalloyed bliss that art, beauty, and fame could never afford:

Our freedom as free lances
Advances towards its end;
The earth compels , upon it
Sonnets and birds descend;
And soon, my friend,
We shall have no time for dances. (104)

Auden, expelled from the company of his contemporaries, is seen as "a twitter of inconsequent vitality", "mild bravado in the face of time", "hidden ice" (*MCP* 96), "voice ... frozen", and "walking ... in the desert of darkness", "in the shrivelled world", (95), in the autumnal setting. "The sunlight on the garden ... hardens and grows cold...(104). His alienation and estrangement from both nature and the human world is suggested in MacNeice's poem, "The Heated Minutes":

If you were here
Among these rocks,
I should not feel the dull

The taut and ticking fear
 That hidden in all the clocks
 And creeps inside the skull—
 If you were here, my dear. (106)

The loss of the company of his contemporaries, the “way to action” (26), and the “dread to lose ... privacy” (16) intensify the suffering of Auden.

The blank period in which Auden's will and creative power seemed to have been completely paralysed after having known the meaning of his “indifferent friends” (*LS*). That Auden passed through the extremity of despair, “our metaphysical distress” (*LS* 15), “a boom in sorrow”, “the presses of idleness issued more despair” (42), a condition described in *Look Stranger!*, is evident in these lines:

In bar, in netted chicken-farm, in lighthouse,
 Standing on these impoverished constricting acres,
 The ladies and gentlemen apart, too much alone.... (12)

MacNeice's account of Auden's “vanity” and his desperate condition as implicitly conveyed in the poem “Bagpipe Music”—“The glass is falling hour by hour, the glass will fall for for ever, / But if you break the bloody glass you won't hold up the weather”—(117) which Thomas giving an imaginative account in the sequence of sonnets, “Altarwise Owl-Light” considers as exaggerated, “uncredited blows” (*Poems* 139). He understands the “choice” of readers and forecasts the rise of Thomas's fame and the fall of Auden's future:

Where life is a choice of instruments and none
 Is debarred his natural music,
 Where the waters of life are free of the ice-blockade of hunger
 And thought is free as the sun,
 Where the altars of sheer power and mere profit
 Have fallen to disuse,
 Where nobody sees the use
 Of buying money and blood at the cost of blood and money.... (*MCP* 174)

Thomas images the “wounded pride” of Auden as “neophyte ...child in white blood bent on its knees ... under the bell of rocks” and the “labyrinths”, the landscape of grief ” of “that greenchild”, and the wound of MacNeice “like a grail through veil and fin and fire and coil ... time on the canvas paths” (*Poems* 133). He adds:

His reels and mystery
 The winder of the clockwise scene
 Wound like a ball of lakes

Then threw on that tide-hoisted screen

Love's image till my heartbone breaks

By a dramatic sea. (133)

To Auden, MacNeice's reportage "lost ... their voice in the flutter of bunting, the glittering ... brass of the great retreat ... and the malice of death" (*LS* 67-68) was prejudiced and distorted:

The sinister tall-hatred botanist stoops at the spring

With his insignificant phial, and looses

The plague on the ignorant town. (68)

He describes "the rash happy cries" of MacNeice as flinty and blunt, heinous and cut-throat, "double act" (*LS* 14), "their wretchedness" (15), "their usual manoeuvres" (20), "so cunning", "deceiving", for "their feet are heavy on the floor ... and their eyes are burning" (21), "false" (25), "insensible to injury ... of out wildly spinning like a top in the field" (30), "the betraying smile" (32), "a little squirt" (36) and "unabashed" (61). To MacNeice, "the wise man, full of humour, ... to whom our misery's a rumour ... and slightly funny", "behind" his "subtle sense of humour" he hides "the boss's stuma" (36). Auden, though indifferent to the "nervous laugh" (59), "to those ... who sat with hostile eyes ... in pairs on every bed", "inert and vaguely sad" (61), stood "stable and silent be" and "grew credulous of peace" with "no trespasser's reproach" (59). He was "the victim of" "worm of guilt" and "malignant doubt" (61) and he knew "that hopeful falsehood cannot stem with love" (62). "Puzzled and jealous about" Auden's greatness, MacNeice turned his hate, nervousness and disappointment to noises of happiness. "Crooked to move as a moneybug or a cancer ... or straight as a dove" (52). Auden sets it thus:

But when the waters make retreat

And through the black mud first the wheat

In shy green stalks appears;

When stranded monsters gasping lie,

And sounds of riveting terrify

Their whorled unsubtle ears.... (*LS*)

MacNeice's "arrogant and self-insulted" utterance and features could be attributed to his fear of extinction according to Auden:

Shall idleness ring then your eyes like the pest?

O will you unnoticed and mildly like the rest,

Will you join the lost in their sneering circles,

Forfeit the beautiful interest and fall

Where the engaging face is the face of the betrayer,

And the pang is all? (*LS*)

However Auden, having “unlearned” his “hatred” (67), was reconciled by “our kindness to ten persons” (*LS*) and “by hour of unity”. He “pursued understanding with patience and “without reproaches” turned his face “to forgive the murderer in his glass” and “tough in its patience to surpass ... the tigress her swift motions” (16) and “towards the really better ... world” (67). He was totally helpless: “Can ... hate so securely bind? / Are They dead here? Yes. / And the wish to wound has the power...It’s a world. It’s a way” (68).

Thomas rephrases the defensive arguments of Auden as “films ... shot in the wind, by tilted arcs” in support of his historical consciousness in the battle of wits between irony and paradox, in the cold war between Auden and MacNeice, between two ancient cultures, Hebrewism and Hellenism in his own way in the poem “Then Was My Neophyte”:

Time kills me terribly.

‘Time shall not murder you,’ He said,

‘Nor the green nought be hurt;

Who could hack out your unsucked heart,

Ogreen and unborn and undead?’

I saw time murder me. (*Poems* 133)

Auden’s juvenile poems enjoy the companionship of his young contemporaries whose juvenile verses heighten the paleness of his “sport ...summer” (*Poems*). “December’s pools ... by crane and water-tower by the seedy trees” enhanced the beauty of the juvenile poems of Auden. In *Poems* (1928), although Auden, is united with them, it is the agony of the fellow poets in hell—“The greenwood dying as the deer fall in their tracks / The first and steeped season...” --that strikes alarm and anxiety in Auden. Ecstasy mingles with despair in “the summer’s game”, in *Poems* (1930): “Hurdles and guns and railings, as the boulders heave, / Crack like a spring in vice, bone breaking April, / Spill the rank folly’s hunter and the hard-held hope.” In *Look Stranger !*, the poet’s experience is fundamentally tragic but a strange calm also pervades the lines: “Hold hard, these ancient minutes in the cockoo’s month, / Under the lank, fourth folly on Glamorgan’s hill, / As the green blooms ride upward, to the drive of time....” What finally emerges is a complex web of diverse strands. Thomas evaluates:

Time, in a folly’s rider, like a county man

Over the vault of ridings with his hound at heel,

Drives forth my men, my children, from the hanging south. (*Poems*)

Auden explains that the height of sovereignty is to suffer and to be:

Love held him fast, but thought he fought for breath

He struggled only to possess Another,

The snare forgotten in the little death;

Till You, the seed, to which he was a mother,

That never heard of Love, though Love was free,
 Which he within his arms a world was holding,
 To take the all-night journey under sea,
 Work west and northward, set up building. (*LS* 62)

In *Poems* (1930), there is the stark realization that so long as he is condemned to the condition of mortality he would never know the answer: “None knows of the next day if it be less or more, the sorrow...” (86). The poem *Look Stranger!* ends on this note of despair and bafflement analogous to Hamlet’s painful ignorance: “The river is alone and the trampled flower, ... through years of absolute cold” (*LS*). And in *Another Time* Auden forms his “ethical resolve ... to suffer and to be” (124).

Thus in the cold war of rhetorics, between Auden and Thomas, between “floods and voluble winds” in waving “their magic wands”, in warning “the dead away”, “in swaying copse”, Day Lewis, Spender, and MacNeice flowed on the warmer currents of Thomas, “the bee finds the pollen, ... the pale boy a cure” (*DCP*). MacNeice sees:

Nursemaids gossiped,
 Sun was bright on pram-paint,
 Gold in the breeze the arrow
 Swivelled on church-tops;
 But Living drains the living
 Sieve we catch our gold in. (110)

The end of 1936 brought a sudden sense of assurance, and the last section of the poems –Cecil Day Lewis’s *Overtures to Death* (1938), Stephen Spender’s *The Still Centre* (1939), Louis MacNeice’s *The Earth Compels* (1938)--that immediately follow *18 Poems* show none of their nightmarish agony. On the other hand, an acceptance of the fact of cyclic change, a faith in the act of living is obviously noted. Thomas’s poem repeats the fact:

Down fall four padding weathers on the scarlet lands,
 Stalking my children’s faces with a tail of blood,
 Time, in a rider rising, from the harnessed valley;
 Hold hard, my country darlings, for a hawk descends,
 Golden Glamorgan straightens, to the falling birds.
 Your sport is summer as the spring runs angrily. (*Poems* 62)

The rich sensuous beauty of Thomas’s 25 *Poems*, of earth, water, air and fire, is celebrated in the poems of the poets of thirties, and as Auden remarks:

Geese in flocks above you flying
 Their direction know;

Brooks beneath the thin ice flowing
 To their oceans go;
 Coldest love will warm to action,
 Walk then, come,
 No longer numb,
 Into your satisfaction. (*LS* 54)

There is a feeling of emancipation from a constricting prison house guarded by hostile watchers, a rich delicious sensation of union, a sense of tragic waste, and a calm despair that accepts the inevitable destiny. Thomas remembers:

There was a time that they could cry over books,
 But time has sent its maggot on their track.
 Under the arc of the sky they are unsafe.
 What's never known is safest in this life.
 Have cleanest hands, and, as the heartless ghost
 Alone's unhurt, so the blind man sees the best. (*Poems* 144)

Thomas, who initiated his poetic career as a voiceless and an unvoiced poet, succeeded in working out his individual patterns in *18 Poems* under the influences of Thomas Hardy and W. B. Yeats, keeping his "door for ever closed ... on the world," his "own world closed within " him and living on his own and acquires a space for his voice. MacNeice evokes:

The first train passes and the windows groan,
 Voices will hector and your voice become
 A drum in tune with theirs, which all last night
 Like sap that fingered through a hungry tree
 Asserted our one night's identity. (*MCP* 109)

In *25 Poems*, he achieves an audience for his positive vision of art and life:

The spray looked white until this snowfall,
 Now the foam is grey, the wave is dull,
 Call nothing white again, we were deceived.
 The flood of Noah dies, the rainbow is lived.
 Yet from the deluge of illusions an unknown colour is saved. (*MV* 366)

The juxtaposition of mortal, "the high tide in a time of stories" and immortal "who ... timelessly lies loving with the thief" (*Poems*), and the contrast or, conflict between reality and imagination-- "Another time has other lives to live"

(AT 62)-- are recurrent in Auden's next volume of poems *Another Time*. Thomas maps out the plan of Auden ahead of him:

Now Jack my fathers let the time-faced crook,
 Death flashing from his sleeve,
 With swag of bubbles in a seedy sack
 Sneak down the stallion grave.... (*Poems* 60)

This motif receives in Thomas's collection *The Map of Love* a special poignancy by the introduction of the death-pale victims of Auden "underneath the leaves of life ...green on the prodigious tree" (AT 63), and "in another's lineaments ... gratified their desire" (64). Thomas is proud of having rescued the lost poets of public element from "the tyranny of" Auden and time:

Bull's eye the outlaw through a eunuch crack
 And free the twin-boxed grief,
 No silver whistles chase him down the weeks'
 Dayed peaks today to death,
 These stolen bubbles have the bites of snakes
 And the undead eye-teeth,
 No third probe into a rainbow's sex
 That bridged the human halves.... (*Poems*)

Thomas who has put the lost poets of thirties on the map is tempted to "a belief in" his "immortality". He hopes against hope:

All shall remain and on the graveward gulf
 Shape with my fathers' thieves. (*Poems*)

Thomas's third volume of poems and stories, *The Map of Love* written against the background of the World War 11 is a touchstone for his a historical and apolitical sensibility. His *18 Poems* and *25 Poems* offer no unequivocal verdict on imaginative pursuit of immortality, "stands awhile immortal" (*DCP*). The uncertainty of the poets of thirties is the poet's own, and the magic spell of Thomas persists. MacNeice sums up:

And now, and last, in London
 Poised on the edge of absence
 I ask for a moment's mention
 Of days the days will cancel,
 Though the long run may also

Bring what we ask for. (MCP)

And the uncertainty of cold war between Auden and Thomas, immortality and mortality is carried forward in a tremendous way in the poems of *Another Time* and *The Map of Love*.

CONCLUSIONS

So, the fierce contest, the cold war between Auden and Thomas for the contemporary poets's attachments and fellowship figures prominently in the structure of *25 Poems*. The contemporary poets's divided loyalty or the conflict between reality and imagination is of central significance in the thematic development of the poem. Just as Last Supper, Lord's bread and wine provide communion between God and His twelve disciples, between Donne and the modern poets, it is "the sense of taste" that "provides communion" (MCP) between Thomas and the grievous poets, Day Lewis, Spender, and MacNeice, between Thomas and Thomas Hardy and W. B. Yeats. "My wine you drink, my bread you snap (*Poems*). Auden's "chosen people" as they smelt "death in the air" became Thomas's "chosen people" for "they have little to lose or fear" (DCP). It is the sense of freedom that made the fellow poets think of Thomas "almost their family friend". In the early poetry of Thomas, *18 Poems* and *25 Poems*, it is suggested that individual minds can attain to such heights or discover their own identities only through the trials of experience. He attempts a further exposition of this parable of his love-making in the next volume of poems and stories, *The Map of Love*.

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